

Chapter 14

Parents as Partners in the Special Education Process: A Parent's Perspective with Suggestions for Educators

Cynthia Sistik-Chandler
National University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide Pre-K through college educators, parents, and administrators who are involved with special education, insight into the processes and procedures from the perspective of a parent. The parent's perspective and involvement with their special needs child is critical in shaping the lifelong, special education experience. The literature and research shows a strong correlation to student success when parents are actively involved in this process. Rooted in the federal and state guidelines from the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all students are entitled to education services from birth through age 21. Recommendations for the Individual Education Plan process as well as strategies for navigating special education services are revealed in this narrative.

INTRODUCTION

When parents are partners with health professionals and educational specialists from the beginning, the process of determining the best pathway for a child with special needs becomes more of a discovery and less of a tumultuous trip. Along the journey, parents make personal observations, fill out surveys and official instruments, write reports, and collect massive amounts of data on their child; then they share their perceptions and continuous concerns with a circle of professionals who help them to navigate the Special Education system. Whether that system is at a hospital, a county or state facility, or is an organization in the public or private sector, parents need to cast the net wide for assistance. The sooner a parent of a special needs child becomes part of a team the sooner support for the student can begin to foster professional collaboration. When parents are partners with teachers and with special education administrators a relationship of trust and respect can be developed. The educator can work to provide strategies and the parent can collaborate with the teacher to support those strategies. Oftentimes the re-

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relationship between all parties develops into comfortable environment of trial and error, one that involves reciprocity of trust. Without mutual and reciprocal advocacy for the welfare of the special needs child, the partnership will not evolve. When one or more parties are absent or uninvolved the relationship can be strained, adversarial, and non-communicative. The best pathway is a pathway where parents are partners.

This chapter is written from the lens of a parent and from one of a teacher educator to inform pre-service teacher candidates, other teacher educators, and special education professionals about experiences and the myriad of pathways students and parents take as a result of special education services and inclusion in the traditional classroom.

Chapter objectives are to:

- Inform about state and federal guidelines pertaining to special education
- Explain supporting research on processes and procedural safeguards
- Describe the various supports both medical and educational
- Share discoveries on what worked during the special education process for one case
- Share discoveries on what did not work along with strategies for engaging SPED teams
- Discuss prognosis for ADHD and decisions to medicate
- List research based, informed strategies on parent involvement with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

BACKGROUND

Although parents may not be medical professionals or special educators, they know their child's strengths and weaknesses. A medical or psychiatric diagnosis may not initially detect a learning disability, but instinctively parents know that something about their child's ability or inability to engage physically, cognitively, emotionally or socially is just not right. Perhaps we have compared our child's behavior to that of another student in class or to an older or younger sibling? We read books about birth, parenting, and milestones and wonder if our child will be okay? We learn, all children have their own pathway to growth and development and that development cannot always be predicted, measured, or reported by all professionals who touch the lives of our special children.

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) for state and local educational agencies (school districts) includes provisions for special education and related services to children with disabilities, ages birth through 3 and age 3 through 21 emphasizes the importance of including parents in decisions regarding the education of their children. Before a school district proposes or refuses to take action regarding the educational program of a child with a disability, the district must provide a "prior written notice" to the parents. The district must also, at specified times, provide parents with a "procedural safeguards notice" which explains their rights under Part B of the IDEA. Further, parents and school personnel are required to work together to develop an individualized education program (IEP) for each child which sets forth the services that the child will receive to meet his or her unique needs. The more special needs partners are involved, the better the journey will be for all.

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